

Communication

A Classroom Management Chapter

By Michelle Henaire and Amy Patterson

Introduction

When you walk into a room after people have been arguing aggressively, you can immediately feel the tension in the air. People avoid eye contact, everyone seems uncomfortable, and any words spoken are very brief. People shut down and do not want to listen. No effective communication occurs because there is a lack of respect and barriers to communication. This is exactly the kind of scenario we want to avoid in our classrooms. When there is a lack of clear communication, there is a lack of learning.



Communication Skills to Model

Respect is a key facet of any successful classroom. It has to be modeled by teachers if we expect our students to treat each other and us with respect. If a teacher is constantly using sarcasm, biting remarks, and making bad examples out of students by belittling their opinions or comments, the students might feel that this behavior is appropriate. This can result in students being disrespectful to their peers, or to the teacher. Disrespectful attitudes do not encourage open communication or a healthy learning environment. Dianne Lind, a secondary English teacher at Nokomis for 25 years, believes that “the most important element to encourage communication is to make students feel safe and respected”, and that fosters good relationships in the classroom.

Good communication and respect can be modeled in our interactions with our colleagues. At times, we may disagree. However, even when disagreeing we can be respectful. This models maturity and wholesome conversation where opinions and ideas can be exchanged while considering multiple points of view. One of the largest obstacles to communication between our colleagues is time. “There is never enough time to meet and talk” (Dianne Lind) because we have conflicting schedules. When our students see us make time to work together and be considerate, this can affect how they treat their peers during class time.

Eye contact must also be modeled in our teaching to show that we are listening. In our teaching methods, we model effective public speaking that can encourage students to communicate effectively through presentations. This will prepare them for later important events such as job interviews. Our [language skills](#) when teaching model good communication through reading, writing, and listening.

Teacher-Parent Communication

As the nature of schools is changing, so are the parent-teacher relations. What's important for parents to know? How involved should they be? These are critical questions that we are going to examine.

So why communicate your students' progress to their parents? Because, according to Steve Reifman, "Parents are usually eager to play a significant role in their children's education, but they often don't know how." This seems to be a large problem. How is a parent to get involved unless they know what's going on in a child's school life? After all, we can't be certain that a child is ready to spill everything that happened at school when a parent asks. More than one child has been asked 'How was school today?' Only to be rebuffed with a simple, "Fine." Teachers need to [bridge that gap](#). In fact, Reifman also says that, "Frequent communication earns parents' confidence, trust, and respect. With open lines of communication, it's unlikely that feelings of uncertainty, mistrust, and alienation will ever arise. The favorable impression that we create makes problems easier to solve when they occur."

So we know why it's important, but HOW can be [communicate](#) with parents? We need to get them involved! For example, the teacher can send a parent survey to the child's home, as an assignment for the parents. The content of the survey is up to the individual teacher, but it could contain things like 'List your child's strengths and weaknesses' or 'What do you observe to be their study habits?' Sometimes the most interesting things can occur from comparing what a child thinks they do to what their parent thinks they do! But their involvement doesn't have to stop at the beginning of the year-far from it! You can have the parents help year around; even after the (somewhat dreaded) parent teacher conferences have passed.

For example:

Social Studies: Have students explore some jobs they might like to do. “Ask students to identify one or two jobs that they find interesting and appealing. Ask family members to help students find out more about these jobs-what the work involves, qualifications, salary and future prospects.” (Rich 1987) Another example, for math: (Also by Rich) “Have the student plan the grocery shopping for a week using a pre-determined budget.” This way, they can discover just how much things cost (a real life connection) and how to budget, another real life connection. The more parents are involved, the more they feel comfortable with the school system. Just remember the one rule when speaking or dealing with parents: Emotions. No matter how stressed, tired, annoyed or any emotion that either the parent or teacher might be feeling, always remain calm, upbeat and professional...even if it hurts. (Lawrence and Hunter)

Peer Inter-relationships

Peers can make a learning experience wonderful or completely ruin the learning. Peers can make it easier to think through concepts by talking these out or reflecting on different takes on an idea. Two teachers from different parts of the country, Hugh Dymont and Daniel Wilcox, used their peer relationship to teach a similar lesson and discuss ways to make it better. When students work in groups they can build off each other's strengths to make a project stunningly detailed and engaging. Peers give both teachers and students many opportunities to revise thinking. Peers can be considered supports in the classroom.

There are also possibilities for communication in the classroom to be hindered due to peer inter-relationships. Peer pressure often results in gossip and teasing. Peer groups and cliques can make some students uncomfortable and unwilling to communicate or participate in the classroom. [“Sociometric status”](#) (Peer Relationships), a form of peer acceptance, can make a lot of students feel left out or that they do not belong.

Negativity in peer inter-relationships should be addressed by the teacher. Encourage students to step outside their normal group of friends and get to know someone new. Introduce the term “[homophily](#)” (tendency of people to drift towards those with similar attributes). Sometimes students do not realize how much in common they have with their peers because they have not taken the time to talk to them and ask their opinion. By stepping out of their typical groups, students can learn more from their classmates. Good communication in the classroom can be seen when students can talk as a class and have a wholesome discussion without dismissing each other’s ideas just because of how someone looks or who they sit with at lunch.

Cultural Impacts and Diversity



(Several Resident Students At Thornton Academy)

“I had a huge problem with cheating last year, almost exclusively from my Chinese students.” Mr. Amoroso explained in our email interview. Why could this be? Is it just these particular students? Is he stereotyping himself? Actually, the answer may surprise you.

"We want fairness. There is no fairness if you do not let us cheat." (theatlantic.com)

Shocked? This chant came from a large mob of 2000 Chinese students in June of **this year**. Why is this? It’s the [cultural expectation](#). At the end of high school in China, students take

an exam called the gaokao, which is essentially a college entrance exam. If you don't get a good grade on these then you don't get into a good college, if you get into one at all. As such, competition is rampant, and to this particular culture cheating is the norm. (Or it was, Chinese officials are trying to crack down on it, which is why a large mob formed.)

This example proves a critical point: Teachers need to be aware of a student's culture. Not only to prevent cheating, as a way to relate to the students. "I often talk about the importance of physics to emerging cultures; where most of my students are from. The Chinese space program often comes up, as does the importance of engineering and technology." Mr. Amoroso tries his best to relate to his students, and they are more willing to listen and understand to what he has to say. But at the end of the day, there is no better way (I believe) then simply trying to discover cultural differences and then explaining what you expect from the students. "Our entire school has made great strides in trying to understand and to help our students understand the differences in our expectations." As we can see from this quote, Mr. Amoroso gets help from his school, and there is no shame in asking your principal or headmaster for guidance and assistance. Another tip would be if you happen to conduct a survey at the beginning of the year, take advantage of this to get to know your students' cultures. If you as a teacher can be well prepared and proactive, or even be ready to react at a moment's notice, then not only can you learn about different cultures but also you can use the diversity to increase the amount of learning that occurs in the classroom!

Language Barriers

[10%](#) of all public school students are English Language Learners. Considering the number of students whose first language is not English has grown by over a million students in the last decade alone (facethefactsusa.org) we can expect this statistic to increase. So what can we do, as teachers, to [help these students](#)? As an example, we are going to look at Thornton Academy in Saco, Maine. In 2009 Thornton Academy first began the international student program, which brings students from all over 12 countries. Most of the students are from China, but there are some from Europe as well as Middle Eastern countries like Pakistan. As you can imagine, the language barrier might pose a problem.

Mr. Amoroso, a high school AP physics teacher at Thornton Academy states that, for him at least, the barrier has not been as bad as he had originally anticipated. “The language barrier is very real, but my students are usually juniors or seniors, so they are much more comfortable with English than the first and second year students. Frankly, I thought it would be a much bigger hurdle than it has been. I have built in many other ways to get the lessons than listening to me talk.” This last statement is the most important. Linguistic learning simply isn’t enough, for English Language Learners (ELL) and for the rest of the students. How can we overcome this gap? For Mr. Amoroso, he uses ‘Pen Casting’. “I use Pen casting to get the kids talking about what they are thinking and Ranking Task Exercises to keep everyone on their toes, conceptually.” Mr. Amoroso has these pens, which record what the person is saying. In his class he has them complete ranking tasks exercises, which are physics problems of varying difficulty as a warm-up and related to the task they will be doing that day. The audio is exported as a type of mp3 and he can listen to their thinking as he reads over their exercises. He also states “I

suppose the subject helps as it is equal parts Math and English.” But what about the subjects that are not part math, for example English and social studies? The answer lies in the idea of multiple intelligences. ELL students will have trouble with the linguistic/verbal intelligence. So, as teachers we should focus on other intelligences. We can include pictures to go along with the words; we can add music to our presentations, and whatever else our creative minds can come up with! The possibilities are endless. Some examples from Glencoe.com are, “Creating a role-play for the students” (Bodily intelligence) creating analogies (logical) and just in general being considerate. “If a student has questions, you answer them, and make it clear that questions are always acceptable to ask. If we, as teachers, make a genuine effort to help ELL students, we will be able to reap the benefits.

Online Etiquette and Communication Through Technology

Twenty years ago, we probably would not have had the need for a section about online etiquette and communication through technology. Today, we live in a very digital world. Technology is a normal part of our everyday lives. It has been integrated into classrooms to make teaching and learning more efficient. Technology has had great impacts on communication in the classroom. Using technology for messages is known as “*asynchronous* communication” because it is a use of symbols and does not use real time. This has been effective for those learning English because it “allows second language learners extra time to seek assistance and polish responses” (Garner and Gillingham). Cultures and generations that are transitioning into the classroom can be helped through technological communication. Their confidence and therefore performance can be boosted by learning this way and communication will improve with their understanding.

With these advancements in technological communication, there are drawbacks to classroom use. Students can easily become distracted, and “it’s much harder to keep their

attention” (Dianne Lind). If technology is to be utilized in the classroom to communicate ideas and further education, guidelines must be set to keep students focused and keep their behavior appropriate for the classroom. Monitoring if students are on task can be done by setting up the classroom so that it is easy to see what is on the student’s screens. Also, walking around the room will discourage students from being off task. Explain to students that their use of technology is a privilege, and that it is to be used to further their education and support their classmates, not to put classmates or teachers down or to use it in other inappropriate ways. Decide what you consider appropriate or inappropriate use, then discuss with the students whether they think these guidelines are fair. Technology and online etiquette have many possibilities for communicate and a good classroom environment when utilized effectively.



If you truly want your students to thrive, flourish, and survive in their education on the road of life, then bona fide communication is a must.

Sources:

Dianne Lind, an English teacher at Nokomis Regional High. She has been at Nokomis for 25 years. Interview conducted via e-mail and received on September 29th, 2013.

Garner, Ruth, and Mark G. Gillingham. *Internet Communication in Six Classrooms: Conversations across Time, Space, and Culture*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996. Print.

"Pay Attention." *Nicolas D. Sampson*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<<http://nicolasdsampson.com/locomotive/pay-attention/>>. Permission Pending.

Ryan, Allison, Kathryn Wentzel, Sandra Baker, B. Brown, Helen Davidson, and Kathryn LaFontana. "Peer Relationships." *Education.com*. N.p., 23 Dec. 2009. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<<http://www.education.com/reference/article/peer-relationships/>>.

"The White House Pushes for Higher-performance Connectivity in Classrooms." *L'Atelier: Disruptive Innovation*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<http://www.atelier.net/en/trends/articles/white-house-pushes-higher-performance-connectivity-classrooms_422924>. Permission pending.

Wilczynski, Edward. "Teaching Basic Communication Skills." *Teaching Basic Communication Skills*. N.p., 20 Nov. 2009. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<<http://www.seenmagazine.us/articles/article-detail/articleid/209/teaching-basic-communication-skills.aspx>>.

Reifman, Steve. "9 Reasons to Communicate Frequently with Parents." *9 Reasons to Communicate Frequently with Parents*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<<http://www.steverEIFman.com/featured-articles/for-teachers/170-9-reasons-to-communicate-frequently-with-parents>>

"Teaching the English Language Learner in the Social Studies Classroom, Teaching Today, Glencoe Online." *Teaching the English Language Learner in the Social Studies Classroom, Teaching Today, Glencoe Online*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<http://www.glencoe.com/sec/teachingtoday/subject/teaching_ell.phtml>.

"Limited-English Students Test Public Schools." *ESL Education*. N.p., 12 Aug. 2013.

Web. 03 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.facethefactsusa.org/facts/limited-english-students-test-public-schools>>.

Schiavenza, Matt. "Here's the Quote That Sums Up China's Huge Problem of Cheating in Schools." *The Atlantic*. N.p., 21 June 2013. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<<http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/06/heres-the-quote-that-sums-up-chinas-huge-problem-of-cheating-in-schools/277108/>>.

"Thornton Academy." ~ *International Students*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<<http://www.thorntonacademy.org/international>>.

Mr. Amoroso, teacher at Thornton Academy. Email Interview-used with permission of both parties. (Myself and Mr. Amoroso) Email recieved on September 30th, 2013

Lawrence, Gerda, and Madeline C. Hunter. *Parent-teacher Conferencing*. El Segundo, CA: TIP Publications, 1978. Print.

Rich, Dorothy. *Teachers and Parents: An Adult-to-adult Approach*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1987. Print.

Photo of the Resident Students-downloaded from thorntonacademy.org (used with permission)

"Thornton Academy." ~ *View Media Detail*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2013.

<<https://www.thorntonacademy.org/podium/default.aspx?t=52562>>.